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Tagore's *Raktakarabi*: An Aesthetic Protest through Floral Imagery and Songs

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore's Raktakarabi is a play against authoritarian exploitation. This paper addresses the protest as a protest bearing aesthetic connotation. Nandini's garniture of red oleander and several songs of the play are two major weapons of aesthetic protest. Keeping in mind Richard Schechner's definition of performance, Nandini, the chief performer leads as well as shapes the course of protest. The floral imagery along with rich musical backdrop manipulates/ reframes the psyche of the other like – the King, the Professor, the Sardars and the hapless miners. This paper also analyses the significance of red oleander throughout the play. This aesthetic protest pulls the King out of his self-imposed confinement and frees the miners from their oppression and bondage.

Keywords: *Tagore, exploitation, protest, performance, aesthetics.*

Introduction

Performance Studies came into existence as a response to the radically changing intellectual and artistic circumstances of the last third of the twentieth century. Performance Studies uses performance as a lens and a tool to study the world. Richard Schechner in *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (Schechner, p 52) states – "there is no historically or culturally fixable limit to what is or not 'performance.'' He defines performance as –"…any action that is framed, enacted, presented, highlighted, or displayed …". Protest can be seen as performance. And an aesthetic protest is indeed a performance. Susan Leigh Foster in her much esteemed article "Choreographies of Protest" (Foster, pp. 395-412) forays three non-violent, leaderless protest in recent US history which take up different distinctive issues and address different kinds of social injustices. We can briefly trace the history of attitudes to mass movement who were more sceptical about such 'impulsive' protests and how the idea changed over time with works that focus on the positive and deliberate choreography of such protests and their often positive consequences. For instances, George Rude's The Crowd in History depicts how crowds continue to make history. Rude analyses well-known events like the French Revolutions as well as less-known events like Welsh "Rebecca" riots and "Captain Swing" in England where he takes a "bottom-up" approach, focusing on the people rather than leaders and elites. He posits the tales of individual participants in the crowd, and develops a theory of the crowd as a political actor in collective actions.

Similarly, Tagore's *Raktakarabi* bears significant traits in the arena of performance Studies as well as performance as protest. Tagore's *Raktakarabi* (1924) or its English translation *Red Oleander* (1925) can be analysed as an aesthetic protest against authoritarian exploitation. Nandini, Ranjan and Bishu Pagla raise their voices against regimentation, authoritarianism and patriarchy. Tagore himself considered the play as a condemnation of civilization that was dominated by machines, evils and lust for material wealth. The central character of the play, Nandini, is the harbinger of protest movement and we can analyse her protest as a

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choreographic performance which would dismantle the entire society. The setting of the allegorical play is an imaginary place called Jakshapuri- the epicenter of imperialism. Jakshapuri appears as a dystopic place (Roy, p -20). The riches of this place are built upon the exploitation of labour and nature. The ruler of this place is an unchristened king (Raja), who veils himself behind his lustrous palace and doesn't appear before the audience. While he represents the centre, dissident Nandini is the choreographer and chief performer of the periphery. She wishes to pull the king from his self-imposed confinement and set him free amidst the bounties of nature and free the masses from their bondage and exploitation.

Raktakarabi: an aesthetic protest

Raktakarabi can be considered as an aesthetic protest due to Nandini's garniture of Red Oeander and the songs of this play. Nandini is always seen to deck herself in ornaments made of red oleanders. Her fiancé, Ranjan, christened her 'Raktakarabi', not because red oleanders are Ranjan's most favourite, but because they signify courage and defiance on one hand, and pain and anguish on the other. The crimson hue of the flower is the reflection of Ranjan and Nandini's mutual love. If one traces the etymology of the Bengali-word Ranjan, it originates from the word 'Ranj', which means to dye in one's colour. The flower performs its role by dyeing Nandini with not only Ranjan's love, but bringing her joy (Ananda) in her endeavours. Ghosh (Ghosh, p. 59) alludes to the fact that Kishore, who is the manifestation of Kamdeva or Cupid, is the sole knower of the whereabouts of the red-oleander tree. He constantly inspires Nandini in her performance against state oppression by supplying her red oleanders which is a forbidden flower in Jakshapuri. This catalyzes Ranjan's love and ideal in her during Ranjan's physical absence from Jakshapuri. Thus, the driving force in the play is Raktakarabi, which becomes synonymous with Nandini. Here red oleanders not only serve as her physical décor and a unique bond that tie Nandini and Ranjan eternally, but also as a tool of protest. And thus, to sabotage the protest and prevent its mass-spreading, the authorities ban red oleanders in the state. But defiant Nandini, heedless of the warning, continues to don them as her ornaments and armour. Therefore, the idea called Ranjan, too, is performed by the flower through Nandini during his absence in the play. The colour red can be pondered on. For instance the Bengali title is Raktakarabi and not Laalkarabi. And the English translation is Red Oleander not Blood Oleander. So, the idea of blood as symbolic of rebellion may be focused on. Red is a potent colour which brings the idea of vibrant pulsating life to the fore. Erik Cohen in his article discusses the deployment of blood as a means of struggle by the members of an extraparliamentary movement, to topple the government, known as the 'red shirts', in March 2010. Two contesting discourses can be traced in this context: the symbolic discourse of blood as a self-sacrificial act deployed by the protesters to curse their enemies, and the medical counter discourse deployed by the authorities, in an effort to neutralize the protesters' act. In Tagore's psyche the colour red is synonymous with blood. He told Rani Chanda that his paintings were exuberantly bluish in hue as the colour blue denoted life to him. On the other hand, his sketches usually lacked reddish tinge. He responded to this complaint by justifying that red to him was the colour of blood, violence and death, and thus, he avoided it in his paintings. Therefore, the colour red and blood were intrinsically similar in Tagore's psyche. Of course, the real reason why he avoided red was, in sooth, he was colour blind to red hue.

The correct implication of the flower is perhaps, best described by the character called, Professor, who says, "There reflects not only daintiness and delicacy but also a fearful mystery in the crimson hue of the flower" (author's translation, p 201). The professor questions why Nandini has chosen red oleander instead of Jasmine, Chameli and Chrysanthemum. The professor further conjectures that choice of flowers signifies a person's destiny, and Nandini has unknowingly chosen her's to be a difficult one, laden with struggle and rebellion. The professor in this observation also hints at Nandini's gender fluidity as well. These white-coloured-sweet-smelling flowers which bloom at night are best suited to adorn the gentle and placid beauty of a Bengali woman, as her fiancé would romanticize and patriarchal society would expect. These flowers have healing effect and thus, complement the care-work a woman is expected to discharge. However

Nandini's garniture of red oleander does not impart a dove-like reposeful appearance. Instead it projects her as a protestor, something which is more suited to a man. The fact that she is rebellious is best conveyed by the flaring red hue of Raktakarabi. Another character, Gokul draws allegory to the bright red hue of this flower as a red-coloured flame. This flame is destined to free the oppressed through its motivation. Nandini justifies her choice of colour by saying that, "Ranjan lovingly calls me Raktakarabi at times. I know not why I feel that the colour of his love is bright red. I have embraced that red and worn it in my chest, neck and hands (author's translation, p 201)". It is Ranjan's ideal that is signified in the floral imagery and conveyed through Nandini in her actions. Ranjan envisages a free and egalitarian society. Nandini therefore has taken upon the task of liberating the society from labour exploitation. Her vivacious nature moves almost every heart of Jakshapuri. On a superficial level, their longing for Raktakarabi is equivalent to their desire for Nandini. But at a transcendental level it signifies the mass's ardent desire to revolt against the state. Even the King aspires that one day Nandini will coronate him with her adornments and emancipate him from his imprisonment, solitude and exile. Bearing in mind the synonymy being the flower and Nandini, they all wish their love is reciprocated by Nandini for she is vibrant, joyful, fearless and harbinger of freedom. Nandini renamed as Raktakarabi is rebellion incarnate. Thus, they all long for red oleanders, alias Nandini. But since they all know that their feelings shall remain unreciprocated, they only implore her for her flowers.

The word oleander comes from two Greek word 'olios' and 'anders', which mean death and human respectively. Thus, the flower signifies suicide though self-poisoning. The play basically is an interplay of two antagonistic forces- capitalism (thesis) and socialism (anti-thesis). The two opposite forces come to forefront when the King joins Nandini, against his own defiant machinery- the Sardars. The rebels knowingly join the revolt, despite being aware of the imminent outcome-death. We thus, discern that the flower inspires the characters to embrace death and not bow down to extortion. Tagore hints at death of Nandini, Raja and others in the duel, but he does not hint defeat. For Nandini inspires a generation to rebel against exploitation, a movement now to be led Bishu, who picks up Nandini's fallen ornaments of red oleanders from the dust. So we see that only in Ranjan's absence, but in Nandini's absence too, red oleanders perform its role of revolt against crime against humanity.

Like other choreographies of protest, songs play an important role in this play. Nandini invites all the inmates of the village by singing "poush toder dak diyeche" ("Hark, its Autumn calling 'come, O, come away..", translated by Tagore himself,) (Bhattacharya, p 202). Beset within the context of the crop-reaping festival of Bengal, called Nabanna, this song is an antithesis to the mining of gold where it alludes to the bounties of crops as real gold. The King too hears this song in the background while Nandini invites him to emerge out of his cocoon, but fails to respond to it due to the vicious cycle of capitalism. It is only at the end of the play when the King breaks the shackles that tie him to his own machineries that he could accept the invitation of mining real gold. Thus, this song interprets this play as a tussle between agriculture and industry.

The madman Bishu's entire protest is revealed through his songs. Bishu sings several songs throughout the play but the song "tomay gaan shonabo" (You keep me awake that I may sing to you", translated by Tagore himself,) (Bhattacharya, p 212) appeals much. Bishu is Nandini's music-mentor. This song serves as an offering to Nandini for waking him up from his oblivion. It not only expresses Bishu's unconditional, yet unrequited love for Nandini, but his unflinching faith on revolt. While Bishu is rendering his duty, Raja however oscillates between truth and disillusionment. The melody sung by Nandini "bhalobasi bhalobasi" ("I love, I love' is the cry that breaks out", translated by Tagore himself,) (Bhattacharya, p 215) talks about all-encompassing love to which the King yearns to respond positively, yet fails to do so due to his facade. Ranjan's song with the accompaniment of the musical instrument 'sarengi' too sets the defiant mood of the background.

Raktakarabi bears some other significant features of protest as performance. Often, Performance is done with the issues related to the common mass. Richard Schechner says, Performance Studies is sympathetic towards the marginal and minority (Schechner, p. 4). Here the background is a gold mine and the dehumanized condition of the labourer. The capitalistic exploitation of the mine labourers is the primary context of the

protest in this play. These mine labourers are made to migrate from their native villages through coercion in order to serve the king. This issue concerns the entire race and not a handful of citizens. Thus, performance in this play is related to common mass, instead of an individual.

As protest is not a part of our everyday routine-bound life, it aids to liberate one's body. The king forsakes his falcon when he protests against his own establishment. Falcon has been the prop that stood in sharp contrast to Nandini's garniture of red oleander. It signified the predator. The king's body is liberated from confinement. And so is his soul by mingling with the common mass and bridging the distance between him and the commoners. Protest operates as a window which would goes beyond their monotonous existence. In *Raktakarabi* Phagulal, the professor, Bishu find in their protest the desired liberation from their oppressed condition from time immemorial.

Conclusion

After the fearless leader Ranjan's death, Nandini becomes the torch bearer of his ideas. We can easily assume after Nandini's martyrdom, Bishu pagla would lead the protesters as he picks up the bangle made of red oleander, discarded by Nandini. The protest becomes an ongoing process and they will not stop until they get 'liberty, equality and fraternity'. The nondescript protesters' ability of absorbing violence is hinted here. They are bearing pain and even ~~a~~ccepting corporal punishment like a chain movement where one protester replaces a new. As pointed earlier, the floral imagery of red oleander signifies blood and revolt against oppression. Nandini's garniture of red oleander is not only accentuating her beauty but constantly provoking the mass as well as the king to join the revolt. The flower acts as a thread that ties the mass in the imaginary garland of rebellion. It starts a chain movement whereby it is passed down from Ranjan to Nandini and thereafter being picked up Bishu to impart eventuality to the process of liberalization.

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